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The Church & Socialism

BY

HILAIRE BELLOC

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THE CHURCH AND SOCIALISM

By HILAIRE BELLOC

The Catholic Church is throughout the world opposed to that modern theory of society which is called *Socialist*, the full and most logical form of which is Communism.

That is a plain fact which both parties to the quarrel recognize and which third parties, though they commonly explain it ill, recognize also.

It is further evident that, the nearer the Socialist theory comes to its moment of experiment, the larger the number of souls over which it obtains possession, the more definite and the more uncompromising does Catholic opposition to it become. But this native opposition between the Faith and Socialism is not one out of many phenomena connected with Socialism. It is the chief.

The movement of Socialism, as it advances, discovers no other serious opponent besides the Catholic Church ; and in a general survey of Europe I cannot but believe that the struggle between these two forces is the matter of our immediate future.

The arguments which Socialists are accustomed to meet in their own non-Catholic surroundings are either puerile or vicious ; the demolition of such arguments is too facile a task to occupy an intelligent mind, and the Socialist by the very exercise of such a controversy

against ineptitude grows to think there is no permanent obstacle to the propagation of his system. He comes to think that his success is merely a question of time. Give him time to illuminate the darkened and to let it be exactly known what he desires, and all—or at least the vast unfortunate mass which make up the bulk and stuff of our modern industrial society—must agree with him.

In such a mood of ultimate intellectual security the Socialist comes across the Catholic Church and for the first time meets a barrier. He finds opposed to him an organism whose principle of life is opposed to his own, and an intelligence whose reasoning does not—as do the vulgar capitalist arguments to which he is so dreadfully accustomed—take for granted the very postulates of his own creed. He learns, the more he comes across this Catholic opposition, that he cannot lay to avarice, stupidity, or hypocrisy the resistance which this, to him, unfamiliar organism offers to his propaganda. Even in this country, where less is known of the Catholic Church than in any other, he has an example. The Irish people deliberately chose to be peasant proprietors upon terms most onerous and delayed, when they could immediately and on far more advantageous terms have become permanent tenants of the State. Such a political attitude in a whole people arrests a Socialist. He cannot lay it to the avarice of the rich: it was on the contrary, the act of men who were then among the poorest in western Christendom. He cannot lay it to the moral influence of a wealthy class indoctrinating the rest of the community with the idea of property, for of all the nations of Europe the Irish are the least subject to oligarchy. He cannot but observe that a people completely democratic and occupied in redressing the most glaring example of the evil which he, the

Socialist, combats, have determined to redress it upon the lines of private ownership and not of collectivism. The concentration of the means of production in few hands, the exploitation of the whole community by a few, had reached in Ireland, after three hundred years of anti-Catholic administration, the very limits of human endurance. It was the worst case in Europe and the very field, a Socialist would think, for the immediate acceptance of collectivism ; and yet private ownership, with its complexity, its perils and its anxieties, was deliberately chosen instead.

Again, the Socialist can but notice when he first comes across them that the Catholic priesthood and the men and women incorporated as Catholic Religious are the most resolute in their opposition to his campaign ; and yet these are the only institutions in Europe to which poverty is, as it were, native : they are the only institutions which revive under poverty and are at their best and healthiest when they are least able to enjoy wealth ; and, what is more, they are the only flourishing institutions in which the means of production are often held in a corporate manner.

There remains one facile explanation which, for a moment, the Socialist may accept. The Catholic resistance he may for a moment, when he first meets it, ascribe to stupidity. He may believe, as was universally believed in Oxford in my time (and, since that place is isolated, is probably still believed there), that no intelligent and trained man sincerely holds the Faith, and that a true conviction of it is possible only to those in whom ignorance or lack of exercise have atrophied the powers of reason. I say the Socialist may imagine this for a moment, in his first shock of surprise at finding men so fixedly opposed to his conceptions, but his very activity in propaganda will soon

change such a judgment. Real Socialists and especially avowed Communists are at once the most sincere and the most actively curious of men. They seek out everywhere men of all kinds in order to convince them of justice : it is their occupation and their very breath ; and in this process they will learn what all travelled and experienced men appreciate, that the spirit of the Church is not a spirit of intellectual supineness. The Catholic irony, the Catholic rhetoric, the Catholic rapidity of synthesis, the Catholic predilection for general ideas and for strict deduction therefrom, the Catholic passion for definition and precise thought—all these may spring from one erroneous attitude towards the Universe ; but whatever that attitude is, most certainly (says the man with a wide experience of European life) it is not an attitude inimical to the exercise of thought. The Church breeds a continual vivacity of intellectual effort, which is discoverable both in history and in contemporary experience. It is alive with an intellectual activity which is perpetually supporting and extending a firm scheme of general philosophy, and is perpetually applying it to the concrete and ever-changing details of society. Those countries which have preserved Catholic tradition may be and are blamed by their opponents for too great an attachment to abstract principles and to ideas : not for the opposite tendency which shirks the effort of thinking and codifying and takes refuge in mere experiment.

The Socialist, then, who comes at all frequently upon Catholic opposition to his creed, grows interested in that opposition as in something novel and challenging to him. After so many unworthy opponents he inclines to look at the Catholic view of economic society as an orthodox Victorian economist, tired of answering idiotic objections to Free Trade, might look at a society

hitherto unknown to him and actually advancing to prosperity through Protection. To put it in few words, Catholic opposition always, nearly always, makes a Socialist *think*. He recognizes that he has before him another world, another order of ideas from those which he has taken for granted in his opponents as in himself. Two societies and two vast organisms meet in this quarrel. The one will necessarily, and that in the near future, attempt to destroy the other; they cannot co-exist; it is of supreme importance to all of us to-day to grasp the nature of the division.

What is it in Catholicism which negatives the Socialist's solution? Here is modern industrial society, evil beyond expression, cruel, unjust, cowardly and horribly insecure. The Socialist comes forward with an obvious and simple remedy. Let private property in land and the means of production be abolished, and let the State control them: let all become workmen under the State, which shall have absolute economic control over the lives of all and preserve to all security and sufficiency. Why does the Church, to which this modern industrial society is loathsome, and which is combating it with all her might; why does the Church, which continually points to the abominations of our great cities as a proof of what men come to by abandoning her; why does the Church, whose every doctrine is offended and denied by this evil, reject the solution offered? It is because she perceives in a certain proportion and order the exercise of human faculties; and having grasped that arrangement she refuses to sacrifice the greater to the lesser, the primary to the secondary thing: she will not imperil what is fundamental in society for the sake of some accidental need, nor deny what is permanent for the convenience of passing conditions. In all the miseries and shipwrecks

of the sexual relation she will not admit one exception to the institution of marriage. In all the corruption and injustice of political society she will not abandon the principle of a social order with its necessary authorities, subordinations, and sanctions.

And to-day in all the disease of economic society and amid all the horrors which the abuse of property has brought about, she will not deny the institution of property, which she discovers to be normal to man—a condition of his freedom in civic action, but much more a necessity of his being.

I will put my argument upon a purely temporal basis for the simple reason that upon any other basis it is not an argument at all. One cannot argue with a man save upon common premisses; and since those to whom this explanation is addressed would never admit the premiss of revelation or of Divine knowledge in the Church, no appeal can be made to it if one desires to explain to them what it is that the Church rejects in their attitude.

Put, then, in purely temporal terms, the Church is a supreme expert in men. Not only is she an expert in the nature of men, but she is from the necessity of her constitution, experience, and expectation of the future, an institution which only considers men in the absolute. The Church will never give a definition that shall apply to men under particular and ephemeral conditions alone, nor, conversely, will she ever accept as general or true a definition constructed only for peculiar and ephemeral conditions. She is concerned with man for ever, and is here to preserve, even in mortal conditions, permanent and enduring things. For instance, to a man of the twelfth century resident in any agricultural part of Northern and Western Europe

it would have seemed the most monstrous of absurdities and the most wicked of doctrines that a man should not be under a lord ; the whole of society was permeated with that idea, yet the Church did not at that time define the feudal relation. She continued to lay down only what is universally true, saying in most universal terms that if civil society is to exist, subordination to constituted authority was a prime condition ; and secondly that such subordination must repose upon a moral basis and had no sanction in mere force. The function of authority, whether in the commander or the commanded, was superior to both.

Now the Catholic Church, as an expert in men and as an expert whose peculiar character it is to refuse as general anything which does not cover the whole nature of man, rejects in Socialism its particular economic thesis—which is its distinguishing mark—but much more rejects, I mean more instinctively and with a more profound reaction, the consequences and connotations of that thesis.

The fundamental thesis of Socialism is this—that man would be better and happier were the means of production in human society, that is, land and machinery and all transport, controlled by Government rather than by private persons or corporations. If the Socialist regards that as universally true, then he holds what may justly be called a Socialist creed, he holds a general theory true under all conditions and at all times ; and that creed the Catholic Church rejects. She maintains (I am not speaking here of her Divine authority or of her claim to speak with the voice of Divine revelation, but only of her judgment upon the nature of men)—she maintains, I say, that human society is fulfilling the end of its being, is normal to itself, is therefore happier, when its constituent families

own and privately control material things; and she further maintains (just what, as we have seen, she did in the matter of civil authority) that this institution of ownership is not merely a civil accident unconnected with the destiny of the soul, nor a thing deliberately set up by man as are so many of the institutions of a State but a prior thing, connected with the nature of man, inseparable from him, and close in touch with the sense of right and wrong. Ownership for a Catholic involves definite moral obligations, exterior to and superior to ownership, but the right of ownership remains. The owner may be a very bad man, the thing owned may be of very little use to him and of great use to another; it still remains *his*, and the evil of depriving him of it is an evil wrought against what the Church regards as a fundamental human conception without which humanity cannot repose nor enjoy the sense of justice satisfied.

Let no Socialist say at this point that so absolute a proposition as that which I have called the fundamental Socialist thesis is not his; that some part of property in the means of production he will always admit: still less let him, in meeting a Catholic, indulge in a hoary fallacy and argue from the necessary influence of the State in economic affairs that Socialism is but an extension of an admitted principle. Every Catholic, from the nature of his creed, is possessed of the elements of philosophy, and every Catholic perceives that to the very existence of a system some definable principle is necessary. The principle of Socialism is that the means of production are morally the property not of individuals but of the State; that in the hands of individuals, however widely diffused, such property exploits the labour of others, and that such exploitation is wrong. No exceptions in practice

destroy the validity of such a proposition; it is the prime conception which makes a Socialist what he is. The men who hold this doctrine fast, who see it clearly, and who attempt to act upon it and to convert others to it, are the true Socialists. They are numerous, and what is more, they are the core of the whole Socialist movement. It is their uncompromising dogma which gives it its vitality; for never could so vast a revolution be effected in human habit as Socialists in general pretend to effect, were there not ready to act for it men possessed of a definite and absolute creed.

For example, let us ask Socialists what they think of a community composed of, we will say, two farming families. The one family owns a dairy farm of pasture; the other owns a farm mainly arable. The two farms are of approximately equal value. Each family is the owner of its farm and each employs the members of the other in certain forms of labour at certain seasons. The pasture farm hires labour from the arable farm at haytime, and the arable farm from the pasture farm at harvest. To the Catholic such a condition of society presents itself as absolutely just. Here is at once ownership, a fundamental human necessity; and yet no inequality, still less any grievance based upon the contrast between luxury above and want below.

Now, your true Socialist rejects a society of that kind. He says that even if the exact balance were struck, and even if the two owning families here supposed had precisely equal enjoyment of material things (a condition which, note you, the Socialist does not propose, for it is not equality of enjoyment that he is seeking, but the Socialisation of the means of production, which he regards as morally exterior to the

category of ownable things), even then he would disapprove of such a community; for though each member of it was exploiting the other equally, yet *exploitation was going on*, and exploitation of itself he conceives to be morally wrong. Note that it is this fundamental attitude which makes the Socialist more bitter against schemes for the dispersion of capital than he is against schemes for its accumulation in few hands. Capital held by many—still more capital held by all, each with a share that forbids him to be proletarian in the State—is the opposite and the contradiction of the Socialist ideal. It is, on the contrary, the consummation of the Catholic ideal; and it is curious to note how those of the chief nations of Europe which resisted the "Reformation" have, since that crisis, tended to the perpetual accumulation of small capital in many hands, while societies which succumbed to the storm have tended to the accumulation of capital in few hands, and to the turning of the mass of citizens into a proletariat economically unfree. Contrast Protestant and Catholic cantons of Switzerland, France and Ireland with England, North Germany with South, etc., and this general historical truth will—with many exceptions—be apparent.

The whole of this quarrel may be put in a nutshell thus: The Catholic Church does not admit that the possession of the means of production is immoral as distinct from the possession of objects which cannot be used or are not used as means of production.

Now there arises on this point a very interesting question, which a man not a Socialist, but convinced that a temporary Socialist experiment is necessary if society is to be saved, may put with great force. All rules with regard to the nature of man are subject, says he, to the existence at least of mankind: and all

lesser rights, however fundamental, must give way before the supreme right of the citizen to live. For instance, shipwrecked sailors upon a raft at sea may justly declare all food common property. The Catholic Church, with its doctrine of a certain minimum below which society may not compel a man to live, with its profound contempt for the results of wealth upon individual character, and with its acute perception of the order or ratio in which men supply their needs, is the first to perceive the necessity for exceptions to many of her own rules. And the questioner I am supposing may say to her this: "Since as a fact our society has got into this abnormally wicked condition in which a handful own the means of production and the mass are economically their slaves, will you not regard it as an exceptional time, and, under circumstances so abnormal and so vicious, promote the establishment, for a time at least, of the Socialist principle?" This was the position which a Protestant of course and a member of the Ministry at the time (the late Mr. Masterman) took up in a debate at the New Reform Club some time ago. He said: Try collectivism, and of course it will turn into divided ownership; but you must have collectivism as a preliminary step.

To this question the Catholic Church again replies in the negative, and her reason for so replying is as follows: That the time in which we live, though historically considered it is most abnormal and vicious in its economical arrangements—perhaps in modern England worse than ever any society was before*—yet is not fatally bound to these arrangements. Those arrangements are not inevitable things which humanity

* These words were written long before the Socialist experiment in the Russian towns.

must suffer; they are not due to external or natural forces which man is not responsible for: they are the direct results of a false philosophy and a vicious training of the mind. The Catholic Church replies to those who point out the monstrous inequalities into which industrial society has allowed itself to drift, that such inequalities have arisen through a myriad tiny agencies all of which have their root in the same false philosophy of life which is now attempting to remedy its own errors by the introduction of a remedy still reposing on the same false philosophy: the remedy of Socialism. It was precisely because men wanted to enjoy rather than to own, because they lost the sense of what is fundamental in man, that they promoted a machinery by which first the great landlord of the "Reformation" rising on the ruins of religion was economically dominant, next the merchant capitalist reached the head of affairs, until now more and more the mere gambler or the mere swindler enjoys supreme economic power in our diseased and moribund economic society. It was precisely because the old European sense of personal connection between the owner and the thing owned was repudiated and lost when the true conception of human life was repudiated and lost with the loss of the Faith, that these monstrous financial fortunes which are the very negation of property at last arose. And the Catholic Church can reply to those who oppose her in this matter, that though she rejects the short cut of Socialism, society can still remedy itself, slowly indeed but effectually, by the adoption of her system with its full consequences, conscious and subconscious, upon every human action and upon the framing of laws. She would further reply that the adoption of but one principle of hers, the sanctity of property, and its consequent diffusion with the corresponding

suspicion and repression of all forms of acquisition which depend less upon production than upon violence or intrigue, would transform society. It is a remedy which every politician could apply who desired to see free men freely possessed as citizens of the means of production, which every voter if he were in earnest could apply, which every writer if he were in earnest could apply.

The Catholic Church, acutely conscious as she is of the abominations of the modern industrial and capitalistic system, sees that system to be dependent upon human wills and curable by their right ordering. She refuses to cure it at the expense of denying a fundamental principle of morality, the principle of private ownership, which applies quite as much to the means of production as to any other class of material objects.

I will not extend these remarks nor expand the slight scope of my paper by showing that the refusal of the Catholic Church to admit Socialism is not a merely negative, but rather a constructive attitude. Every Catholic knows instinctively, as it were, that the erection of society upon Catholic lines makes for the destruction of servitude in every form. Every Catholic knows that Catholic morality produced the European peasant out of the material of the Pagan slave, every Catholic knows that it is in Catholic societies that revolt against intolerable economic conditions has been most fruitful, and every Catholic further knows how impossible it would be and is to establish in a fully Catholic society the monstrous institution of industrial capitalism. In a word, a Catholic feels that a Catholic society dealing with modern methods of production would be a society admitting great differences in the properties possessed by and controlled by individuals, but that it would of its nature eliminate that type of

citizen who is in possession of none of the means of production and is proletarian. The Catholic Church—I speak here continually of its historical and temporal action, not of its revealed doctrine—knows men so thoroughly that, while insisting upon equality in certain temporal rights and in all spiritual things, it does not insist upon equality in economic enjoyment, for the simple reason that what men primarily need in this province is not equality but sufficiency and security. The Catholic conscience is convinced that sufficiency and security are more permanently attached to a society of divided ownership with the responsibilities, the family organizations, the sense of inheritance, the mutual obligations which make it an organic and forbid it to be a mechanical thing, than they are attached to the deliberate action of a despotic government. Now, a Catholic, relying upon Catholic training in thought and morals, can go further. He can say that were you to attempt the establishment of Socialism your effort could not but ultimately result in some form, and that a very evil form, of private ownership, with the controllers fewer and more powerful than ever.

Personally I cannot but see the future in this light. A society in which the Church shall conquer will be a society in which a proletariat shall be as unthinkable as it was unthinkable in the Middle Ages. Such a society would, under modern conditions of production, end as a society of highly divided properties bound together by free co-operative organizations. On the other hand, a society in which one Socialist experiment after another takes its place in the scheme of laws will not end as the ideal collectivist society which those just, sincere, and ardent men whom I am here opposing propose. It is far more likely to end as a state in which a very small class of free owners shall control a very

large servile class into which the mass of citizens shall have sunk.

This is the peril which I believe to lie before society, and especially before the non-Catholic societies of Northern and industrial Europe, with their subservience to Jewish finance and their inheritance of an anti-Catholic philosophy. Every step towards the artificial regulation of contract brings us nearer some such final solution ; and a solution it will be, though I dread it. A society once established upon those lines would have forgotten how to rebel ; the security and sufficiency of the servile class would be the price of their servility, and the sense of freedom, with its incalculable consequences on human character, will, for the bulk of our descendants, have disappeared. It is a peril inconceivable to either party in the great modern quarrel, but it is close at hand. The only alternative I can see to that peril is, even in the temporal and economic sphere, the action and effect of the Catholic Church upon citizenship.

P.S.—The above paper was written in 1909. In 1917, upon the collapse of Russian society under the strain of the Great War, certain Jewish conspirators having as their chief director a certain Braunstein (who concealed himself under the false Russian name of Trotsky), established Socialism in the greater part of the Russian towns. At the time when this paper was first revised (1921) this system, maintained by a rigid military discipline, still survived there. It had the same director put up as a figure-head, one Lenin, a Russian who was connected with Braunstein's clique by his domestic relations. The lamentable condition of the Russian towns under this alien experiment, its reliance upon the worst forms of terror, its disgusting

excesses, and its increasing failure even as an economic system have been the theme of innumerable exhortations, most of them designed to support the industrial system.

At the moment of the second and present revision of this paper, 1931, Lenin being dead, another figurehead, one Stalin has been set up and Braunstein set aside, but incidentally the same alien clique controls the experiment. It is making desperate efforts to establish itself permanently and still greater ones to spread communism in the west.

By far the chief moral to be drawn from the whole tragedy has been carefully avoided by the bulk of the Industrial Press in Europe, and has been wholly ignored in Britain. It is this: *The one barrier to the spread of Socialism (Communism) over Christendom from its Russian centres has been the Catholic Church.* A real or affected ignorance of this truth has warped half our foreign policy, and has, in particular, weakened our own future in Europe by a complete misunderstanding of the Polish people and their position as the bulwark of civilisation in the East.

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